Module Preview

The goal of this module is to discuss why organizing the working class is central to advancing democratic socialism.

By understanding classes under capitalism as a set of relationships between social groups (rather than a set of attributes such as income level, education, or cultural affinity), socialists identify who is on which side of the fence in capitalism. (See this 2-min video, What Is Class for background on the socialist definition of class).

This lesson takes up what makes the working class uniquely capable of and willing to confront capitalism. It is not because we are a majority (we are) or because we are the most oppressed

and exploited (we are) but because of our central role to capitalism. The benefits accrued by the capitalist class are causally linked to the exploitation of the working class. Therefore, as Viviek Chibber succinctly puts it, the working class has the leverage to change the world because "capitalists can only make their profits if workers show up to work every day, and if they refuse to play along, the profits dry up overnight."

Finally, working class struggle is also essential to liberation of all sorts. Capitalists not only exploit us, but they also dominate us politically and socially to ensure their continued power and prosperity. As Ellen Meiksins-Woods and Sara Nelson each argue, the only path out of this relationship is a collective struggle to end political, social and economic exploitation.

In this module you will find:

1. Readings:
    1. Why the Working Class?
    2. Why Class Struggle is Central
    3. Solidarity is a Force Stronger Than Gravity
    4. Wage Labour and Capital
2. Discussion Guide
3. In-depth Questions for Each Reading

Reading A: "Why the working class?" by Vivek Chibber

Background

Vivek Chibber, a socialist and professor of sociology at NYU wrote this article for Jacobin in 2016 and in it he argues that workers should be at the center of socialist politics because they alone have the power to challenge capitalism.

Reading B: "Why Class Struggle Is Central" by Ellen Meiksins Wood

Background

Ellen Meiksins Wood was a Marxist historian. In this article from 1987, she asks two questions: Is class central to socialism? And should socialism be our goal? At the time, the organized socialist movement was very weak, and new social movements for racial, gender, and sexual equality were taking its place. So Meiksins Wood makes the argument that the working class is essential for achieving socialism, despite setbacks, difficulties, and failures.

As opposed to a vision of socialism that says socialism is merely the unification of diverse movements for social justice, Wood wants us to understand that socialism encompasses these

movements but also goes beyond them -- to attack capitalism at its foundation.

Reading C: "Solidarity is a Force Stronger than Gravity" by Sara Nelson (Transcript)

Background

Sara Nelson is the International President of the Association of Flight Attendants and a prominent progressive labor leader. In the summer of 2019, she addressed DSA's largest ever Convention, which occurred during a surprising wave of strikes by teachers, hotel workers, and others. Much of the convention revolved around the power of the working class when we organize -- which is what Nelson spoke about.

Nelson draws on diverse stories throughout the U.S.'s history to show how organizing at work not only improves people's lives, individually and as a group but that rather than being just another form of activism, labor organizing is our most powerful weapon.

Reading D: "Wage Labour and Capital" by Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels

Background

In this pamphlet Marx and Engles make the case that capitalism itself puts the worker's interests at odds with the capitalists'. They say that the basic economic premise of the system is the exploitative relationship between the capitalist bosses and the workers, leading to constant class conflict. If you don't have much time to read, or you haven't read much Marx before and find him hard to understand, you can first check out this one page primer summarizing the pamphlet's key arguments.

Discussion Guide

If no one has prepared notes for the discussion, have one or two members read out the Module Preview.

Objectives: Understanding why the working class is the center of socialist focus.

Core concepts:

- Organizing the working class is central to advancing socialism.
- The working class is uniquely capable of and willing to confront capitalism because profits are created by working class labor.
- Working class people adopt ruling class ideas like racism and sexism. But those kinds of

divisions aren't in their interest.

Some best practices:

- Encourage everyone to speak: trying to explain things or articulate your questions is the best way to learn.
- Throughout the whole session encourage people to respond to each other's points and questions.
- Encourage questions if participants have any of their own. Highlight those questions for others in the room to respond to.

Part 1

Open-ended questions that anyone can answer are a great way to get a conversation going (try a go-around if the group is small, or break out into groups if the group is very large) and ask:

How do people in your family, community, or workplace talk about class? Do they talk about the working class? What class do they identify as?

Part 2

Watch this 2 minute video explaining class.
Then ask the group:

- What do you think class is?
- What is the working class?

- What class are you?

Part 3

Watch this video of Sara Nelson, President of the Flight Attendants Association from minute 4:24-16:10 (~13 min). And ask the group:

- Why do you think Nelson says that changes start not in Congress, but at the bargaining table? Was her argument compelling to you? Do you believe that organizing workers at work is a way to win major reforms beyond the workplace too?
- Do you think socialists should focus on organizing the working class? Why or why not?
- Can we organize with workers who have racist or sexist ideas?
- How might identity based oppressions serve capitalism and not workers?

(If a point is made that may be subject to debate, ask others to respond if they see things differently. Encourage everyone to use "I" statements.)

Part 4

Read the following excerpt from Vivek Chibber's "Why the Working Class?":

> The working class has this power, for a simple reason—capitalists can only make their profits if workers show up to work every day, and if they refuse to play along, the profits dry up overnight. And if there is one thing that catches employers' attention, it's when the money stops flowing.
>
> Actions like strikes don't just have the potential to bring particular capitalists to their knees, they can have an impact far beyond, on layer after layer of other institutions that directly or indirectly depend on them—including the government. This ability to crash the entire system, just by refusing to work, gives workers a kind of leverage that no other group in society has, except capitalists themselves.
>
> This is why, if progressive social change requires overcoming capitalist opposition—and we have learned over three centuries that it does—then it is of central importance to organize workers so that they can use that power.

Now ask the group:

- Where does the power of the working class come from? What makes it special?

- Is socialism impossible if workers do not support socialism right now? Why or why not?
- Why should we identify a group in society that can achieve socialism?

In depth discussion questions for each reading

Reading and discussing **Why the Working Class?:**

- Why does capitalism fail to meet the material needs of a majority of people?
- Why is the working class uniquely positioned to challenge the capitalist class?
- How do people in society, at your workplace, in DSA, talk about the working class, if at all? Why do you think that is?
- What are ways DSA does or does not put the working class at the center of its politics?
- What are examples of political efforts that center the working class?

Reading and discussing **Why Class Struggle is Central**:

- Is socialism impossible if workers do not support socialism right now? Why or why not?
- Why do we need to identify a group in society that can achieve socialism?

- How is our capitalist society founded on class oppression? What are other types of oppression and what is their relationship to class?
- How does capitalism "use" social categories like gender and race?
- Why does Meiksins Wood say that socialism is the "most potentially emancipatory" political project there is?

Reading and discussing **Solidarity is a Force Stronger than Gravity:**

- Why is it important to learn about the labor movement's past? Think of some examples of successful working-class organizing.
- How can we overcome "the law, the political environment, and the economy"? In other words, where does change come from?
- What does Nelson mean by "using power builds power"?
- What is solidarity and why is it so important? Why can having a union lead people to fight for each other despite their differences?

Reading and discussing **Wage Labour and Capital**:

- Why does the distinction between labor and labor-power matter? How might it help us understand class definitions and class relations better?

- Why is the relationship between capitalists and the working class necessarily antagonistic?
- History has borne out Marx's assertion that capital grows exponentially over time. But some argue that the conditions of working class life today is better. Do you agree? If you do, does that contradict Marx?

Header Photo: New York state nurses at the People's Climate March, September 21, 2014 (Joe Brusky / Flickr)

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